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ABSTRACT

Anecdotal evidence from literacy educators sometimes suggests that many people can do well despite being illiterate; however, this perspective ignores the essential theory of literacy. This theory rests on the premise that the most essential difference between human beings and other creatures is the human ability to make "symbolic transformations." Today the capacity to deal with symbolic transformations (writing) is almost universal. Literacy then can be justified in terms of its essential nature. So construed, literacy is self-justified: literacy for the sake of literacy, as a fulfillment of the human biosocial destiny, and therefore, as a human right. Literacy is "potential added" to newly literate people. The essential theory of literacy is linked with the concept of "symbolic capital." This refers to the body of knowledge made possible by literacy that can be owned by individuals, groups, and cultures. An equitable distribution of societal knowledge capital is part of the distributive justice and of the moral social order being sought today. Implications of this theory are that: (1) literacy should be promoted as an essential human right; (2) programs of "literacy advocacy" should precede programs of "literacy teaching"; and (3) evaluation of the effects of literacy in the informal economy and evaluation of customer satisfaction are important. (KC)

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THE ESSENTIAL THEORY OF LITERACY

AND

ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING AND EVALUATION

By

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In this presentation, I will share with you some thoughts on two of my favorite topics at this time: (1) the essential theory of literacy, and (2) the implications of that essential theory for programming and evaluation of literacy.

BEFORE THEORY, SOME STORIES

The continuum between story and theory should be easy to see, particularly in the social sciences. Social scientific theory can be seen as a prototypical story -- "one story telling many stories." New stories from life keep on coming in to

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reinforce existing theory or to question it, demanding a new prototypical story, or the new version of an old story.

Here are some stories I recently heard.

STORIES OF SOME IMMIGRANTS TO AMERICA

During the later half of October 1990, I was in Washington, D.C. participating in a colloquium on literacy commemorating the International Literacy Year -- 1990. I had, of course, my opportunity to offer a colloquium, but the stories I am about to tell you came from the presentation given by one Dr. Gail Weinstein-Shr who has done some important literacy work, specifically in the teaching of English as a second language, with uprooted families from the Far East who have migrated to the US. We did not have a written paper from her and there was no time to find out all I would have liked to know from her. But this is what I heard.

She told us of one Chou Chang in her group of learners who was a very good student, and who persevered until he had completed his General Diploma in Education (GDE). He seemed to have good social skills and made many friends among the Americans. He did find work but did not do too well economically. As racial tensions rose in the area where he lived, he moved away from the East Coast. In his new location in the Midwest, he was again struggling, doing two jobs to be able to survive.

Pao Joua Lo came to class irregularly and for some time, was absolutely quiet while he was there and then dropped out completely. Weinstein-Shr later learned that Pao Joua Lo was a war hero, much respected in the old country, and one who had retained his leadership status among his people in the new country. He was literate in his native language, but did not learn much English. While he did not read English, he yet had an extensive file of newspaper clippings in English which he was constantly persuading others to read. Through a variety of means, he had kept up an extensive nationwide communication network with his countrymen who had now settled in all parts of the U.S. His compatriots had helped to build him a big comfortable home in America, the like of which most of them could not perhaps afford for themselves.

Then there was Bao Xiong who also dropped out of her English language group. She could not read even in her mother tongue. However, she had learned to "read" American tastes and did a good job of making handicrafts that Americans would like to buy. She got her literate son to make little leaflets for

her which she handed out to her customers and did an excellent job of making sales. Again, with the help of her son, she developed a list of addresses which she used with great effectiveness to stay in touch with her customers.

Finally, she told us of a Hispanic girl from one of her classes who had become literate but who was now being beated up by her illiterate husband.

WRONG IMPLICATIONS. To the best of my knowledge Weinstein-Shr is not against literacy teaching. Indeed, teaching literacy is her vocation. Again, I would not suggest at all that she intended to draw from her stories the implications that are -- wrongfully -- possible to draw. Whether intended or not, these stories do have some negatively mischevious implications.

The lesson from Pao Joua Lo's story seems to be that literacy in English in English-speaking America is not a necessary skill for success. Infact one can do without it. A social network is what is more important, and a high status in this social network within a particular subculture can bring high economic rewards without having to work for them. Again, Bao Xiong's story seems to tell us that it is better to be smart than literate, and that it is quite possible for an illiterate to succeed by merely learning to use others as mediators in regard to the world of print.

Literacy by itself will not help, it is rightly suggested in Chou Chang's story. Even literacy of a very high standard was of little use to him as he struggled with two jobs to make both ends meet. Finally, the Hispanic girl warns us that "Literacy can hurt!"

Before proceeding further, a few more stories.

STORIES FROM RAJASTHAN, INDIA

More recently, I was in New Delhi, India during November 20-22, 1990 to attend yet another seminar on literacy, once again, to commemorate the International Literacy Year -- 1990. There were several papers including one that I had the privilege of presenting. However, the stories I recount are from a paper by Sanjit Bunker Roy, the director of a nationally-known rural development project in Tilonia, Rajasthan, the desert state of India. He told us with pride that:

"The administrative in-charge of the day to day activities in Tilonia is illiterate."

"The in-charge of the drinking water section -- the person who monitors and supervises the technical ground water surveys, the deployment of drilling rigs, the training of hand pump mechanics and the installation of handpumps -- is an illiterate."

He gave us many more examples from his project in Tilonia of high responsibilities given to people with very low qualifications.

ONCE AGAIN WRONG IMPLICATIONS. Mr. Roy claims not to be against literacy. (With friends like that, who needs enemies!) He is merely sick of the rhetoric in behalf of literacy. He wants attention first to be given to the common school. About literacy he says, "That literacy is relevant and important so long as it does not mean that [the newly literate] have to leave their roots and [as long as literacy is not taught] at the expense of the village. So long as what they learn is useful and relevant to their understanding of their own village setting,[for example,] where the threats and pressures exist and who is responsible for keeping [them] poor, it is important." (His language. I have tried to make it a bit more intelligible).

But the stories that are told and the way they are told leave the clear impression that Roy suggest emphasis on school and not on adult literacy, that he considers literacy unnecessary for the business of rural development and indeed he does consider educational qualification as a distinct disqualification for work in villages.

A DIFFERENT CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

People who tell us such stories are often dedicated development workers. But while they may have the best of intentions, they do not always seem to have the best of understandings about the development process or about the role of literacy in development. Some of them begin to think that the only type of development work worth doing in the world is of the type of work that they happen to be doing at that time.

Too often, literacy sceptics have expectations from literacy that are deterministic and magical -- irrespective of an individual's historicity or the surrounding social context. They seem to be asking: Why did not Chou Chang with his 12th grade literacy in English do better than Pao Joua Lo and Bao Xiong? They perhaps imply that we may be better off doing something else than teaching literacy.

Literacy sceptics have not learned to make justifiable comparisons. Too often, a literate "X" is compared with an illiterate "Y". What we should learn to do is to compare the old illiterate "Z" with the now literate "Z", that is, learn to compare the effectiveness of the same person before and after literacy. We must remember the fact that literacy is a social process which will be constructed uniquely by each new literate within the context and constraints of his or her own history and social setting.

Roy in India may be pro school because he dare not question what is already well established; and may be lukewarm to literacy because he does not need anyone else to be literate as long he is in control of the Tilonia project and can supply the much needed literacy component to his project himself. We should not miss to see the dependent and even the exploitative nature of relationships between Roy and his group, between mother Bao Xiong and her son, and between Pao Joua Lo and his compatriots.

THE ESSENTIAL THEORY OF LITERACY

The seeming contradictions in the stories about literacy implied in the above discussion can be resolved if we work with what we have called the essential theory of literacy.

The structure of the argument for the essential theory of literacy is this: The most essential difference between human beings and other creatures is the human ability to make what Susan Langer has called the capacity to make "symbolic transformations." The total structure of human cultures -- myth, history, craft, art, science and technology, religion, law and institutions -- is possible because of this human capacity for symbolic transformations.

Spoken language was the first breakthrough in the growth of the Homo sapien at an earlier period in the human evolution. Written language is the second true breakthrough. It has taken five thousand years for writing to develop as we know it; but we are today at the brink of the inevitable -- the universalization of the capacity to deal with symbolic transformations in the second dimension, that is along the dimension of writing.

Literacy should then be justified in terms of its <u>essential</u> nature, the extension of the human ability to make symbolic transformation now to include two dimensions -- of speech, and of writing. So construed literacy is self justified

-- literacy for the sake of literacy, as a fulfilment of the human biosocial destiny, and, therefore, as a Human Right.

THEORETICAL DERIVATIVES OF THE ESSENTIAL THEORY OF LITERACY

A Human Right is its own justification for its fulfilment. Yet, in the case of literacy, we have a Human Right that is absolutely fertile. Social, economic, political and cultural justifications for literacy can all be derived from the essential theory of literacy.

Since literacy is further capacitation of the human ability to make symbolic transformations, literacy is "potential added" to the now literate. In other words, it creates in the new literate the potential for making more effective transactions with all aspects of the human environment -- social, economic, political and cultural.

There is no time this morning to actually demonstrate how the political theories, social theories and economic theories of literacy can be derived from the essential theory of literacy discussed here; and how the economic, social, and political consequences and non-consequences of literacy can be shown to occur or not to occur in particular social and historical contexts. I invite you to pursue this line of thought.

FROM SYMBOLIC TRANSFORMATIONS TO SYMBOLIC CAPITAL

However, a related and most important theoretical link should be laid bare right now. It should be noted that the essential theory of literacy -- literacy as an extension in human capacities for symbolic transformations -- is conceptually linked with the concept of "symbolic capital." Literacy has made it possible to separate the message from the message-maker. Messages, of course, contain information, some of which is nonephemeral. That made "knowledge" possible which in turn made "knowledge accumulation" possible. This accumulated knowledge -- knowledge capital or symbolic capital -- can be owned by individuals, and collectively, by groups, institutions and cultures.

An equitable distribution of the societal knowledge capital is part of the distributive justice and of the moral social order we seek today. Literacy is a Human Right because all human beings should have the right to share freely in collective knowledge capital. The stories told in the beginning of the paper tell us that it is possible to do without literacy

and yet become rich and run a statewide water resources development enterprise. The question, however, is if we want to apply distributive justice to the distribution of symbolic capital as well or not. I am quite clear that we do want distributive justice in the domain of knowledge capital as much as we need distributive justice in the domain of material capital.

What are some of the implications of the essential theory of literacy for policymaking, programming and evaluation?

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

First of all, as policy makers, we should not confuse the "possible" with the merely "probable." We should not simply lower our sights because the possible is difficult to actualize. And surely, we should not rationalize our neglect of all things difficult!

The most important policy implication of the essential theory of literacy is that we promote literacy as a fulfilment of a generalized Human Potential and, therefore, as a Human Right, first and foremost.

It follows that we should not neglect literacy of adults simply to divert resources to the literacy of children. Third World policy makers should beware of those who want to give them primary schools and rationalize their adult education and adult literacy programs out of existence.

Since according to the essential theory of literacy, literacy is "potential added" to the human individual, literacy should be justified as a tool of extension for all extensions -- agricultural extension and health extension.

Since literacy is so <u>central</u> to the process of culture and technology and their transformations, we must give adult literacy the best of resources of money and minds.

PROGRAM DESIGN IMPLICATIONS

Programs of "literacy advocacy" should precede programs of "literacy teaching." Illiterate adults are often unaware of their self-interests and of the usefulness of literacy in their lives. Literacy advocacy, therefore, should be part of the literacy promotion efforts.

Pluralism in programming for literacy should be accepted, but the special role of the literacy mass campaign as the

mobilizer of resources of both the state and the masses should be understood.

Objectives of literacy programming should be defined not only in terms of literacy skills learned, but also in terms of the release of individual potential, and the symbolic capital accumulated by individuals, families, gender-based groups, communities and classes.

Literacy materials should be designed to teach literacy using general cultural content presented to suit the logic of the language of literacy. Functionality and awareness must be taught but need not be written into the reading materials. Integration of literacy, functionality and awareness should be obtained through discussion of ideas and learning of skills relevant to the context, and through specially written applied materials.

EVALUATION IMPLICATIONS

Literacy increases human potential and human potential is not actualized only in the formal sector of the economy. It affects the whole person in all his or her transactions with all the environments. Hence a more comprehensive view of impact should be developed and studied. Most importantly, evaluating impact of literacy in the informal economy, in the politics of the community and in second socialization of self and others is absolutely essential. This would perhaps mean clusters of interviews with new literates, their spouses, their children, their peers and work mates and others in the sacred and secular institutions with whom they deal.

Evaluating customer satisfaction is particularly important. In evaluation, we must go beyond reading scores and collect data on self perceptions of new literates of their own sense of increased potential and uses being made by them of their literacy, howsoever rudimentary, in their daily lives.

Evaluation schemes must involve development of profiles of distribution of knowledge capital between genders, between families, groups, communities, and ethnicities; and of uses being made of the power of knowledge capital.

I hope you can help me think of some further implications of the essential theory of literacy presented today.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

What are the practical possibilities of this morning's ritual? I am not quite sure. Technical assistance is not conducted according to technical rationality. It is a curious mix of politics and logic, of the personal and the professional. To keep my sense of self-worth, I have to believe that when you now in this room hear stories about literacy in the future, you will not be in a hurry to draw lessons that seem obvious but are dead wrong.